

## Practical Godliness

### Lesson 4 | Pure and undefiled Religion – A Heavenly Requirement



Our Christianity is a lot like riding a bicycle. You must stay connected to the bike, the source of power, to propel you forward and you must keep moving or you will lose momentum and fall as you lose your balance. So, it is with our walk with Jesus. Christ is like the bicycle. He is our source of power, the life-giving Vine we must stay connected to (John 15:1-4). If we profess to have faith in God but do not reflect our faith in the way we live, then it is like trying to ride a bicycle without peddling – inevitably, we will crash. The ability of the bike to do something for us that we cannot do on our own, is its ability to draw us to it, much like the Spirit of God draws us to Jesus (John 16:13-14). The bike's ability to become more and more balanced as we peddle faster is like our faith being strengthened the more time we spend with God in prayer and in His Word; in turn, we have power to share our faith with others. Lastly, peddling is practicing what we preach. James 2:18 says you can attempt [and fail] to show me your faith *without* your works, but **I will show you my faith by my works**. Likewise, your witness comes not from saying you have a bicycle, but by riding it. This is practical godliness and no other book defines this kind of spiritual symmetry between faith and works like the book of James.

### Speaking of religious balance, how does the Bible define religion?

#### **James 1:26-27 (ESV)**

If anyone thinks himself to be **religious**, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to **visit orphans and widows** in their distress, **and** to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Consider in verse 26 that "religious" means "faith in Jesus" because when he uses the word "religious" (in verse 26), or talks about "pure and undefiled religion" (in verse 27), is that this is what he continues with in the next verse (2:1): "My brethren, do not hold **your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ** with an attitude of personal favoritism." There is no break in the flow between 1:27 and 2:1; so, there is good reason to think that "pure religion" is "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." That is James' religion. And his point is, if you say you are religious, or say you have faith, but you don't bridle an unloving, lying, gossiping, cursing, angry tongue, then your faith - your religion - is worthless. In other words, it is faith that saves us, but whether our faith - our religion - is real is shown by the change it brings about in our hearts and lives.

Verse 27 gives another very concrete example of the kind of spiritual balance required for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. James says, "Pure and undefiled religion [that is, real faith in our Lord Jesus Christ] in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."



### Thinking Deeper:

Notice the two kinds of effects that pure religion or faith in Christ has:

- 1) Practical compassion toward orphans and widows, and
- 2) Personal purity of life

This is important to see, because so many Christians fall off the horse on one side or the other. Some fall off by saying: What matters is personal purity - sexual purity, financial integrity, a clean thought life, and so on; but they are weak in practical deeds of compassion for the poor and helpless. But some fall off the horse on the other side, by saying: What matters is social justice and compassion and helping people, and what you do with your mind and body and your private personal life is not significant. James says, in verse 27, that pure and undefiled religion - true faith in Jesus Christ the Lord - stays on the horse. It is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." **Not either/or, but both/and.** Social justice **and** personal piety. Public compassion **and** private purity. Proactive steps of kindness **and** protective vigilance against defiling sin.

### To visit the orphans ... in their DISTRESS

Many do not realize the brevity of this command from the Word of God. Before we can visit the orphans, let's look at something that occurred in our history that was a defining moment for America. Roe v. Wade, a [legal case](#) in which the U.S. Supreme Court on January 22, 1973, ruled (7–2) that unduly restrictive state regulation of abortion is unconstitutional. In short, America legalized abortion on a federal government level allowing all women to have a right to abortion.

### What does James 1:27 have to do with Abortion?

What does abortion have to do with orphans? The connection I see is this: God wants us to be concerned about orphans because they are helpless without mother and father, and we should feel compassion for the helpless who depend utterly on others for life. Picture a three-year-old child riding in his safety seat on the back seat of a car with his mommy and daddy riding in the front. There is a terrible crash and both mommy and daddy are killed. The child has minor injuries but is okay. The hospital officials check and discover there are no grandparents and no other family members known. This is a heartbreaking situation. And God says to the church, step in there and take care of that child.

So, orphans are children whose parents have died and left them at the mercy of others to take care of, lest they die. How does abortion relate to that? Well, abortion puts the child in a worse situation. The parents are not dead, but they have turned on the child and choose to have the child dead. This is worse than being an orphan. To have Mommy and Daddy choose to have you dead is worse than Mommy and Daddy being dead.

Therefore, it seems to me that if God wants us to care about the orphan whose life is endangered because his parents are dead, he would want all the more that we care about the child whose life is endangered because his parents choose to make him dead.



### Thinking Deeper

#### Is the Unborn Child a Person?

Of course, the objection could be raised that the unborn child is not a child, and so doesn't qualify for the compassion of this verse. But there are several reasons why an unborn child is a child:

- 1) Scientific evidence has shown that the fetus has all the crucial genetic elements of human life.
- 2) The differences between the unborn baby and the born baby are differences that don't count in determining whether this is a human life: size, shape, looks, immature reasoning capacity, physical dependence, etc. These are simply irrelevant, because they all apply to the newborn outside the womb too. Advances in ultrasound makes this clearer every day.
- 3) Doctors treat the unborn as legitimate patients just as they do the born children.
- 4) The idea that the Bible teaches that human life begins with breath (Genesis 2:7) breaks down in view of other texts that say the life is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11).
- 5) The age of viability in the womb is getting earlier and earlier, with no clear line of demarcation between human and pre-human, or between person and pre-person.
- 6) The insistence of [US Presidents](#) and others to keep the partial birth abortion procedure legal shows that the basis of their position is not that the unborn are not human. Here we are talking about children that are within four inches of qualifying for the right to life, and yet are legally killed.

Instead, **the moral bottom line** is this: **It is a tragic choice between a mother's plans and a baby's life.** Today, **the legal bottom line** is: **A baby in the womb has rights to life if the mother wills it to; and does not if the mother does not will it to.** There are [fetal homicide laws](#) that stand as a stunning testimony in our culture that it is a crime to kill an unborn baby if the mother doesn't want you to. Yet [abortion laws](#) say it is not a crime to kill the same baby if the mother wants you to. The difference is not the humanity or the personhood of the child. The difference is the desire of the mother. The rights of the weak are defined by the will of the strong.

So, the objection that James 1:27 doesn't have implications for the unborn because they are not human persons is wrong. They are persons created by God in the womb. Therefore, James' command to have compassion on the helpless who have lost mother and father applies to them if their mother and father turn on them and become worse than dead parents; namely, killing parents. If orphans should be cared for by God's people, how much more children whose parents reject them. And when it says, visit them "in their distress" we may ask, "Is there any place of greater distress than in the womb of a woman who gives herself over to abortion?" This is the greatest distress any child will ever experience. To be torn limb from limb in the very place that should be the safest place in the world is "distress" if there ever is anything called "distress." "Visit orphans in their distress."

## Visiting Orphans

Let's put abortion in the context of the wider need for compassionate action toward orphans. In some of the states and [countries emerging from Communism](#), the increasing number of orphans is huge. For example, in Romania, there are nearly three abortions for every live birth, the highest rate anywhere in the world. And still, "Hundreds are abandoned daily in hospitals and at the front doors of the orphanages." An estimated 350,000 street children "huff inhalants, panhandle, and live underneath bridges and in the municipal dumps of Bucharest and other cities" (Roy Maynard, "[Disposable Children](#)," WORLD Magazine, Vol.13, No. 48).

These are mind-numbing realities and evidences of the sin and calamity and futility that are in this fallen world. And the call on the church is to take this massive word "**visit**" in James 1:27 and apply it in radical, risk-taking, thousand-faceted ways to rescue the orphan for Christ and his kingdom. Why is this word "**visit**" a massive word? Because it is used in some massive ways in the Bible. Exodus 4:31 - "The LORD had **visited** the children of Israel [in Egypt], and he had looked upon their affliction." Luke 1:68 - at the coming of Jesus, Zacharias says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has **visited** us and accomplished redemption for His people." "Visiting" is a huge word. It carries wonderful redeeming overtones and what a great calling it is for the Christian hungering and thirsting after practical godliness.

Abortion has not solved the problem of unwanted children. It never will. **Killing unwanted children will never be a solution. There is another way. James 1:27 points the way.** Helpless children are a great concern to Christ, and He says that our religion, our faith in Him, will express this concern with radical, risk-taking acts of compassion.

## Visiting Widows

But before I finish, let me tell you one thought that springs from the word "widows" in verse 27. Many women who have abortions are worse off than widows. The pain of widowhood is great. The loss of a husband - or the one who fathers your child - in death is heartbreaking beyond words. But the loss of a husband through abandonment is in some ways worse. The amputations caused by death usually heal clean. The amputations caused by abandonment often stay infected. It does not heal the same. Women who abort are often desperately alone. They are in a worse situation than many widows.

## What then should the Church do?

[Dave Andrusko](#), former Editor of National Right to Life News, said that some think the conflict between pro-life and pro-choice will just go on and on, without resolution. But he pointed out that this is based on a false assumption: namely that the two sides speak two different languages: one invokes the woman and one invokes the unborn child. Not so, he says. "In truth, pro-lifers are bilingual, lifting up both mother and child. And because they are fluent in both languages [which pro-choice people are not], they can lead American women by the most

natural route imaginable" out of the impasse. He and many others see the tide turning in our culture, which is far less enthusiastic about abortion than it was in 1974 ("[The Pro-Life Movement Then and Now](#)," First Things, Nov. 1998, No. 87, p. 36).

It is my prayer that the religion of our church will be "pure and undefiled religion" - pure and undefiled faith in our Lord Jesus Christ! May God grant us to speak both languages of compassion: the language of the orphan and the language of the widow. The language of the helpless child and the language of the desperate woman. There are many other languages we must speak (to the fathers, to the lawmakers, and to the doctors, etc.) but whatever we do, let us not be silent. For if we are, our religion is empty, and our faith is dead (James 1:27; 2:14,17).

One author put it this way, "While the graft is outwardly united with the vine, there may be no vital connection. Then there will be no growth or fruitfulness. So, there may be an apparent connection with Christ without a real union with Him by faith. A profession of religion places men in the church, but the character and conduct show whether they are in connection with Christ. Taken from the book, *The Desire of Ages* p.676.5

